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COMPETENCE CENTER Fair Trade

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NEO-/COLONIALISM IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE?

The Role of Fair Trade

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Background

Sustainability-oriented trade regulations from the EU and its member countries increasingly affect producers in the Global South. Regulations like the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), the EU Organic Regulation, the German Supply Chain Duty of Care Act and the European Supply Chain Directive (Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive - CSDDD) aim to foster sustainability, but produce double-edged effects. Academic, NGO and activist critiques frame these regulations as Eurocentric interventions that reveal neo-colonial patterns in trade relations with the Global South.

This Policy Brief presents recommendations and interventions for government policy-makers and Fair Trade institutions seeking to foster more equitable international trade practices. Unless otherwise indicated, our recommendations are based on 14 in-depth expert interviews with representatives from Fair Trade organisations in the Global North, producer networks in the Global South, representatives from producer initiatives and academic experts.

Key Recommendations

Promote New Alliances in Multilateral Trade Negotiations

New alliances should be formed – and existing ones should be reinforced – to encourage fair trade practices. This should be coupled with an engagement of multipliers focused on fairness, ensuring equitable representation of local communities, and the inclusion of Indigenous and smallholder voices in trade negotiations.

Integrate Local Knowledge

The fair participation of Global South producers requires that international trade agreements respect Indigenous practices, land use traditions and local realities.

Shift Compliance Burdens to Global North Importers

Multinational companies in the Global North should bear the costs and responsibilities of supply chain compliance, including offering financial or technical support for producers.

Strengthen Workers and Producers to Take Leadership in Standard Articulation

Fair Trade, and the Fairtrade system in particular, should further strengthen certification models in which workers and producers take the lead in the standard articulation. A rightsholder perspective must be integrated into the core design of governance and monitoring processes (Martin-Ortega & Treviño-Lozano, 2023). Such a systematic, participatory approach would ensure that local actors have a say in both the development and ongoing assessment of Fairtrade standards.

Address Colonial Legacies in Fair Trade Value Chains

Fair Trade organizations must critically assess and reform structures that perpetuate colonial patterns, particularly regarding the Fairtrade-certified cooperatives, plantations and factories. Fair Trade as well as the Fairtrade System should support land redistribution efforts, including policies that give workers and farmers access to land to cultivate beyond the constraints of colonial land use and ownership legacies.

Promote Livelihood Diversification and Local Food Security

Fair Trade, and the Fairtrade System in particular, should not be limited to the premium and to securing access to export markets; rather, their scope ought to extend toward enhancing income stability through livelihood diversification strategies, including crop diversification and agroforestry. Policies must aim to improve local food supply in producer regions and boost food security and sustainable development in sourcing countries.

Fair Trade, fair trade, Fairtrade?

It is crucial to distinguish between "fair trade", "Fair Trade", and "Fairtrade", as they carry distinct mean-ings. The general term, **fair trade**, refers to trade practices that are conducted fairly, without neces-sarily invoking any formalized system or certification.

Fair Trade denotes the broader **social movement** and **network** of institutions, organizations, and actors committed to the principles of fair trading, such as equity, transparency, and sustainable development.

Finally, the terms "**Fairtrade**", "**Fairtrade certifycation**" or the "**Fairtrade system**" denote the legally protected certification mark. It is a recognizable consumer label that appears on products in compliance with official Fairtrade standards.

Historical and Structural Challenges in Global Trade and Fair Trade

Colonialism's economic systems, which relied on resource extraction and the exploitation of cheap or forced labor, positioned colonies as the raw materials suppliers for industrialized metropolitan centers. Infrastructure in the Global South (like railways and ports) was built merely to facilitate exports, not sustainable local growth. Such long-lasting dependencies on Western markets persist today, severely hindering the industrial and economic development of many regions, including Africa, South America, and Asia (Ashcroft et al., 2000; Mabanza, 2012). The deeply intertwined spectrum of multiple colonialisms – including post-colonialism, colonial continuities, green colonialism, neocolonialism – and decolonization (see Table 1) creates complex tensions between commitments to equality, fairness, and justice in trade and the current sustainability-oriented trade regulations.

Operating in capitalist modes of production, contemporary international trade frameworks and free trade agreements continue to facilitate the export of raw materials from the Global South at low prices, while the bulk of added value and profit remains concentrated in the Global North (Mason et al., 2023). These structural inequalities also affect Fair Trade's supply chains, limiting the movement's ability to foster genuine economic empowerment amidst colonial continuities. Fair Trade's model of simultaneously being 'in and against the market' creates a persistent tension between achieving ethical trade and maintaining a market orientation. Furthermore, traditional development cooperation reflects Western economic interests and often reinforces colonial power relations. Modernization ideology, which posits Western development models as universally applicable and superior, is not only false, it fails to recognize the utility of hybrid, locally adapted solutions that address systemic global inequalities (Escobar, 1995;

nema, 1997).

Concurrently, well-intentioned, sustainability-oriented trade regulations continue to be designed in the Global North. They tend to be top-down and protectionist, marginalizing the voices of affected stakeholders (or better: rightsholders) and communities in the Global South by foregrounding ecological criteria while sidelining human rights concerns. As Spivak (1988) warned, Western actors often speak for marginalized groups rather than with them (let alone intrinsically valuing Southern voices). This problem is evident in frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals, where large multinational corporations influence the agendas. Unilever, for example, was heavily involved in the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) as it was penning the SDGs (Langan, 2018).

Such top-down trade negotiations exclude producers and actors from the Global South. Regulatory authorities in the Global North set standards and act on behalf of those impacted, a process described as "Accountability-by-Proxy" (Koenig-Archibugi & Macdonald, 2013; Mason et al., 2023). Such dynamics are reminiscent of colonial governance, where decisions were imposed with essentially no local participation. The sheer complexity of the resulting regulations may even push producers away from European export markets, undermining producers' economic stability or motivating a return to unsustainable practices.

Many European regulations currently impose Western legal norms universally, overlooking alternative systems like Indigenous rights frameworks (e.g., the rights of nature). A comprehensive legal and economic decolonial restructuring is needed to redress power imbalances between the Global North and South (Debhi & Martin-Ortega, 2023). This approach would question both the legitimacy of European regulations that exclude stakeholders and rightsholders from its policy-making processes, and the regulations' appropriateness for addressing localized corporate impacts in the Global South.

Policy Implications, Problem Statements and Recommendations

This section first previews general policy implications before discussing five major problem areas, general recommendations and Fair Trade/Fairtrade-tailored interventions.

Policy Implications

- ❖ Recognize and actively address the historical and ongoing structural inequalities rooted in colonialism and how they shape global trade and Fair Trade/Fairtrade systems.
- ❖ Ensure that sustainability regulations incorporate both ecological and human rights, with meaningful participation from producers and communities in the Global South.
- ❖ Reform trade and development policies to support local economic diversification and empower producer-led governance.
- ❖ Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches by integrating Indigenous and alternative legal frameworks into policy making.
- ❖ Facilitate inclusive, transparent decision-making processes that give producers a direct voice in trade negotiations and regulatory frameworks.

Problem Statements and Recommendations

Problem Statement 1

Indigenous movements and smallholder organizations in the Global South are de facto excluded from the formulation of multilateral trade regulations.

International trade agreements do not adequately consider the needs, realities, and economic and social concerns of Indigenous movements and smallholder organizations in the Global South.

Recommendation: Promote New Alliances in Multilateral Trade Negotiations

Multilateralism is key for trade negotiations, policies and regulations. Consulting Indigenous voices, NGOs, local social movements and smallholder organizations allows for fairer inclusion of the perspectives from the Global South. New alliances favoring co-creation processes should be formed. This should be coupled with the engagement of multipliers to ensure equitable representation of local communities, including Indigenous people and smallholders, in trade negotiations.

Intervention: Strengthen Political Advocacy and Local Empowerment through Capacity-Building in the Global South

Fairtrade, other Fair Trade organizations, and human rights NGOs should expand their political advocacy and invest in political capacity- and skills-building in the Global South. Such efforts could support economic policies that help farmers to take political action and place the burdens of upholding fair trade on producing country governments.

Problem Statement 2

Local and Indigenous epistemologies, languages, cultural practices and knowledge systems are marginalized.

Trade regulations and agreements from the Global North

ignore local traditions, epistemologies, cultural practices, languages and existing knowledge systems. This creates disruptions in the producing regions and gradually undermines locally-adapted production methods. It disregards the importance of local or Indigenous knowledge systems, especially intangible knowledge and cultural heritage, that often proved itself to support resilient agricultural practices and climate mitigation and adaption (Orlove et al., 2022).

Recommendation: Respect and Mindfully Incorporate Local/Indigenous Knowledge into International Trade Agreements and Regulations.

Integrating local and Indigenous knowledge systems, traditions, and land-use realities into policies can improve the relevance, acceptance, and effectiveness of sustainability regulations. These knowledge systems often include practical and overlooked solutions for sustainable resource management. International trade agreements should also respect Indigenous practices and local land tenure traditions. Finally, regulations should be simplified and linguistically adapted to reduce implementation barriers and foster broader uptake.

Intervention: Invest in Inclusive Knowledge Production for Fairtrade Decision-Making

Fairtrade and other Fair Trade organizations should invest in participatory knowledge production formats that center the lived experiences, working conditions and needs of farmers and workers. A robust, locally grounded knowledge base is an essential input for system-relevant decision-making. To achieve this, Fairtrade could establish thematic Task Forces or Communities of Practice that facilitate continuous input from producers to ensure decisions are informed by context-specific realities, not top-down assumptions.

Problem Statement 3

Sustainability-oriented trade regulations impose unrealistic deadlines and high costs on producers in the Global South, with no legally mandated compensation for these expenses.

Regulations, including performance and compliance obligations, place significant burdens on producers, especially smallholders, who often lack the time, resources, technology, and capacity to comply. Without the provision of appropriate resources, institutional capacities and staff, producers suffer disproportionate burdens. For example, the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) does not clearly assign responsibility for compensating its compliance costs through financial aid or technical support. Consequently, implementation and verification expenses are often passed down to the producers, straining their limited resources and sometimes forcing a shift to alternative export markets, generally in Asia. Power imbalances in trade further exacerbate producer burdens since multinational companies importing primary products and cash crops can easily shift suppliers if standards are not met. This dynamic can shift environmental harm and human rights violations to other regions (see 'buyer-driven supply chains' – Gereffi, 1994).

Recommendation: Shift Performance and Compliance Cost Burdens to Importers in the Global North

To prevent unfair cost transfer to producers, regulations should clearly assign financial responsibility for sustainability compliance to importing companies in the Global North. These companies have a wider profit margin and more capacity, and should bear the costs of both performance and compliance. Such legally mandated financial aid and technical support from downstream actors would assist producers in meeting compliance requirements and ensure that multinational companies shoulder the primary responsibility – and associated expenses – for upholding sustainability standards.

Intervention: Advocating a Fair Distribution of Compliance Costs in Trade Regulations

Fair Trade should expand its political advocacy on this issue. In collaboration with human rights NGOs, it should continue to urge the EU and national governments to reintroduce compliance cost allocation into regulatory negotiations. Fair Trade organizations should also promote livelihood diversification, such as crop diversification and agroforestry, to support sourcing regions' local food production and food security, in addition to facilitating export market access.

Problem Statement 4

Global North Dominance and Cultural Hegemony Limit Smallholder Representation and Influence in Fair Trade/ Fairtrade Governance

Fair Trade is widely recognized for its role in setting ethical sourcing standards that shift power and financial resources within supply chains (Bronkhorst, 2018; Neilson & Pritchard, 2010; Raynolds, 2018). However, challenges remain in ensuring that the 'living income price' for their products translates into a genuine living income and living wage for smallholders (Gröne et al., 2024). Like other sustainability-oriented trade regulations, Fair Trade's/Fairtrade's governance and regulatory frameworks (i.e., key standards, mission statements, and certification processes) have historically been shaped in the Global North.

Although producers in the Fairtrade system gained 50% voting rights at the 2011 General Assembly, major de-

cision-making bodies remain dominated by consumer countries and market-based price-building mechanisms. For instance, within the Standards Committee, only a few producer-facing members speak for thousands of producer organizations and millions of individuals. Given this skewed numerical representation, the voices of smallholders across three continents – each with diverse socio-economic realities – remain notably underrepresented in key decisions. Coupled with this, cultural hegemonies (Gramsci, 1971) and power asymmetries (Dallas et al., 2019; Archer, 2021) prevail in negotiations and decision-making. Importantly, interviewees from the Global South expressed a sense of perceived inferiority in discussions and interactions with Fair Trade stakeholders from the Global North. This perception may stem from internalized ideological and cultural frameworks that position the Global North in a hegemonic role (see also Policy Brief No. 2).

As recommendations operate at a higher, more general level and for reasons of readability and conceptual clarity, the subsequent sections present only tailored interventions for Fairtrade.

Intervention: Empowering Workers and Producers in Fairtrade Governance

Fairtrade should embed worker and producer perspectives into its certification design, governance, and monitoring of standards. A systematic, participatory approach would involve rightsholders from the outset and center their lived experiences through ongoing oversight (Martin-Ortega & Treviño-Lozano, 2023). Fairtrade could also improve its democratic governance by institutionalizing co-determination rights at all decision-making levels. This includes creating inclusive, system-wide processes (e.g., Task Forces or Communities of Practice), and ensuring that producers and their representatives have a voice in key negotiations. Fairtrade staff in the Global South should be supported when building governance capacity, and producers must be empowered to bring relevant stakeholders and experts to decision-making forums.

Furthermore, Outhwaite & Martin-Ortega (2019) argue that singular inspections or audits are not sufficient for ensuring workers' participation in monitoring and certification processes.

Intervention: Promote Worker- and Farmer-Led Governance in Fairtrade

Fairtrade should incentivize worker- and producer-driven certification and ensure balanced participation in internal decision-making. Rightsholders must be involved in the system design, monitoring and remediation. Their perspec-tives should be at the center of a structured, participatory oversight process.

Kuiper & Gemählich (2017) note how Fairtrade's ideas and mission statements, when transferred to the local level, can have a depoliticizing effect, particularly in how producers and workers interpret sustainability and justice. Similarly, Brugger & Wenner (2020), in a study of Indian tea plantations, identify how local Fairtrade staff played a gatekeeping role in defining sustainability.

Intervention: Pursue a Needs-based Approach to Fairtrade Policy and Monitoring

Decision-making should center the everyday challenges and needs of producers through regular, standardized, and in-depth assessments of their working and living conditions. These efforts would complement traditional compliance or impact evaluations and move away from top-down, supervisory approaches (see Policy Brief No. 2).

Problem Statement 5

Although Fairtrade pursues a reformist approach for addressing the social and ecological impacts of capitalist production, its market-based model risks reinforcing the very colonial structures and dynamics it seeks to challenge

Fairtrade has positioned itself as a reformist initiative that aims to increase equity and fairness in global trade. It seeks to strengthen local economic performance and reduce dependency on former colonial powers and global financial institutions by influencing price-setting mechanisms and enhancing producer incomes. These goals are aligned with decolonial visions (e.g., Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, 2020) that aim to revive Indigenous knowledge systems and challenge Eurocentric dominance in global trade narratives. However, Fairtrade faces a fundamental tension: its attempts to promote alternative trading models operate within the constraints of global capitalist markets and price-building structures (Braun et al., 2020). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues that dismantling colonial economic continuities requires previously colonized states and societies to define their own development paths, independent of Western prescriptions. Development cooperation – and, by extension, parts of the Fairtrade system – is often seen to reproduce colonial logics.

This is particularly evident in Fairtrade's supply chains, where structural continuities with colonial-era plantation systems remain largely intact. Many plantations – such as those producing tea in India, sugar cane in Jamaica or bananas in former colonies – still reflect colonial patterns of ownership and labor. Interviews underscore how descendants of colonists often still own processing factories and land, while descendants of enslaved people continue to cultivate the land (see also critical contributions from Delle, 2014 and Brugger & Wenner, 2020 on the plantation mode of production).

As such, Fairtrade's market-based model, especially in

the context of hired-labor and plantation systems, risks remaining ambivalent about or is even perpetuating the very colonial structures it aims to reform.

Intervention: Address Colonial Legacies in Value Chains

Fairtrade should advocate for land redistribution that allows workers to access land beyond former colonial plantations. Fairtrade must also reform systems that perpetuate inequality in value chains, especially in hired labor and plantations, to address colonial legacies. Scientific baseline studies are needed to support this restructuring of colonial continuities.

Fair Trade's Contribution to Decolonial Practices

In conclusion, Fair Trade has achieved notable successes in advancing decolonial practices at the local level, despite its ambivalences about operating within the constraints of the global capitalist market. Profanter (2020), drawing on Moberg (2008), highlights that Fair Trade has helped decouple trade relations from traditional development discourse and has empowered producer cooperatives to make decisions with relative independence from external institutions and comercial pressures. This progress is rooted in the broad alliance of consumers, producers, and human rights advocates that make up the global Fair Trade network.

From its inception, the Fair Trade movement has integrated grassroots and Indigenous producer initiatives, contributing to what Escobar (2017, p. 336) calls a "pluriversal" political economy – one that respects multiple knowledge systems and allows for diverse forms of local governance. Despite ongoing challenges, Fair Trade's partnerships with regional producer associations have supported locally-driven decision-making and enabled the implementation of socially beneficial infrastructure projects. Profanter (2020, p. 16) adds that the fair price and premium system have created meaningful "free spaces" where local communities can reduce cultural, political, and economic dependencies. These spaces allow grassroots movements to drive decolonial change and renegotiate local power dynamics. By fostering economic autonomy and integrating producers into the market on more equitable terms, Fair Trade helps preserve and strengthen local cultures and knowledge systems – key pillars of decolonial transformation.

Abbreviations:

CCFT – Competence Center Fair Trade
CLAC – Coordinadora Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Comercio Justo
CSDDD – Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive
EU – European Union
EUOR – European Union Organic Regulation
EUDR – European Union Deforestation Regulation
FI – Fairtrade International
FTA – Fairtrade Africa
GA – General Assembly
ITC – International Trade Centre
NGO – Non-governmental organization
NFO – National Fairtrade Organization
NAPP – Network of Asian and Pacific Producers
PN – Producer Network
UNCTAD – United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WTO – World Trade Organization

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Glossary: Multiple Intertwined Colonialisms

Post-Colonialism

While post-coloniality refers to the social condition after formal colonial rule, post-colonialism is not restricted to a historical period. It is a theoretical perspective and scientific field of study (Ashcroft et al., 2000) that examines how colonial histories continue to shape politics, economies, cultures, and identities, often in literature and representation. It acknowledges that colonial legacies – economic dependence, political structures, and cultural influences – continue to shape formerly colonized nations and critiques the ways in which colonial ideologies persist in governance, identity, and knowledge production.

Colonial Continuities

This concept describes the colonial structures, ideologies, and power dynamics in nominally post-colonial societies. The wealth of European industrialized countries is broadly based on imperialism, colonialism and the exploitation of resources and labor in the Global South (cf. Fanon, 2015 [1961]; Mbembe, 2014; Spivak, 2007a, 2007b). These continuities produce economic dependency and inequality, as many former colonies are still tied to their ex-colonizers for trade, investment, and financial aid. Political structures also exhibit continuities with colonial-era legal systems, administrative institutions, and governance models; even colonial borders remain intact, which can lead to instability or reinforce divisions imposed by colonial powers. Finally, cultural and epistemic continuities include Western languages, education systems, and knowledge production that marginalize Indigenous knowledge and cultural expressions.

Neo-Colonialism

Neo-colonialism refers to the continuation of colonial power and influence in a new form or through new parties. Rather than exerting direct political control, former colonial powers (and global economic institutions) now assert influence through economic, political, and cultural means. The idea of neo-colonialism was theorized by Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah (1965), who described neo-colonialism as a systemic problem in which a former colony gains nominal political independence, but is economically and politically influenced by the outside (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 4). For example, post-colonial states are often financially dependent on development cooperation programs and their production and export of natural resources are often controlled by foreign companies. Former European colonial powers and the United States enact neo-colonial policy, as do states without a colonial history, such as Saudi Arabia or China (e.g., Chinese companies' land grabbing practices in various African countries (Ziai 2020, p. 137; Bräutigam & Zhang 2013, p. 1676)).

Key aspects of neo-colonialism include economic control, whereby former colonies remain dependent on (formerly colonizing) Western nations and multinational corporations for investment, trade, and development aid. Institutions like the IMF and World Bank have historically imposed structural adjustment programs that limit economic sovereignty. Former colonial powers and global superpowers also exert political influence, interfering in the post-colonial states' political affairs and supporting regimes that align with their interests. Finally, cultural and epistemic dominance – Western education, media, and cultural values – continue to shape global narratives, often marginalizing local and Indigenous perspectives. Western epistemic dominance arises from its privileged position within historically, materially, and socially/culturally entrenched power structures (cf. Vaditya, 2018; Gramsci, 2019). Notably, in today's global capitalist economic system, neo-colonial practices can also target states with no colonial history (e.g., see European financial policy during the 2007/08 economic crisis and its impact on Greece (Ziai 2020, p. 137)).

Green Colonialism

Green colonialism refers to the imposition of environmental or sustainability policies by powerful (often Global North) actors in ways that disproportionately burden or disempower communities in the Global South, often without their meaningful participation or benefit. The term criticizes top-down environmental goals that reproduce colonial patterns of extraction, dependency and inequality under the guise of sustainability (Claar, 2022, p. 269). For example, the European Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) has been criticized for its heavy compliance burdens (e.g., traceability, satellite monitoring, due diligence reporting) that fall on smallholder farmers in the Global South, who have insufficient support and were not included in the policy's development. High environmental compliance costs may exclude producers from EU markets, despite having contributed almost nothing to global emissions or deforestation. Under green colonialism's structural inequalities and power imbalances, the Global North sets rules that the Global South must follow.

Decolonization and Decoloniality

Decolonization identifies and actively dismantles colonial structures, ideologies, and dependencies. It is an ongoing struggle against "hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved" (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 56). Decoloniality's political, economic, cultural and epistemic forms fight for liberation from ongoing colonial structures that characterize global power relations (Quijano, 2000). This includes and exceeds the struggle for true sovereignty and the resistance against external political interference. The 'decolonial turn' is associated with late-20th-century Latin American, African and Indigenous scholars who outwardly challenged the dominance of Western epistemology. However, such ideas can be traced back to older anti-colonial struggles and postcolonial thought. Key thinkers include Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo.

GSSC – Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne

The Global South Studies Center (GSSC) at the University of Cologne coordinates global, interdisciplinary research focusing on current affairs topics, such as migration, sustainability and infrastructures in Africa, Asia and Latin America, particularly human-environment relations. The GSSC supports scientific projects and makes research accessible to an academic audience and the broader public.

Competence Center Fair Trade

The Competence Center Fair Trade (CCFT) promotes interdisciplinary research on Fair Trade in German-speaking countries. It supports research, teaching, professional exchange and collaboration with Global South researchers. The CCFT helps make applied scientific findings accessible to policy and public audiences through policy briefs and position papers.

The Center focuses on social sustainability, justice, and fairness in trade, particularly in agriculture and food systems. Key topics include climate change adaptation in smallholder farming, implementing HREDD in supply chains, and decolonial perspectives and Indigenous knowledge. The Center's research areas are selected in partnership with Fairtrade Germany, which co-funds the CCFT.

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